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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001572

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, INR (VINCENT)  
NSC FOR MORROW  
PACOM FOR FPA (HUSO)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2017

TAGS: PGOV PTER PINS PINR ASEC KDEM TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: SECTARIAN PASSIONS RISING

REF: A. BANGKOK 01390 (UPDATED VIOLENCE STATISTICS)  
1B. BANGKOK 01385 (MARCH 8 UPDATE)  
1C. BANGKOK 01288 (ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND RELIGION)  
1D. BANGKOK 01037 (REALITY ON THE GROUND)

Classified By: Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary. A series of high-profile incidents in southern Thailand since March 11 is inspiring growing concern among South-watchers that the prospect for violent, sectarian clashes between Muslims and Buddhists in that troubled region is increasing. These incidents are provoking public outrage and may lead to reprisals. According to one of our contacts, elements in the Ministry of Interior are working to inspire broader, nationwide Buddhist outrage over the violence, in order to pressure Prime Minister Surayud to toss aside his reconciliation platform. Surayud publicly reiterated his support for this policy on March 15 saying "we will solve southern unrest only with peaceful means." Security officials on the ground, meanwhile, are increasingly frustrated by the lack of government action in response to these attacks, according to a Western contact of ours. These dynamics increase our concern that local Buddhists, or even security forces--in particular the irregular paramilitary "Ranger" units--may cross the line, inspiring further bloodshed, and ushering in a new, more dangerous era of sectarian conflict. End Summary.

#### LONGSTANDING CONCERNs

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12. (C) As noted in reftel reports, many local observers of the southern conflict have noted the lack of overt sectarian conflict since the January 2004 upsurge in violence. While Buddhist-Muslim ties in the South have been frayed by the violence--resulting in significant mistrust between these groups--for most locals, the fighting has largely not been defined in religious terms, nor has it resulted in tit-for-tat attacks between Buddhists and Muslims. Indeed, despite public statements by some members of the royal family for Buddhists throughout the nation to support their cousins in the South, the southern violence has not attracted that much attention in the rest of the country. That may be changing.

A DARK DAY IN YALA

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¶ 13. (C) In a story that landed on the front pages of Bangkok's newspapers the next day, a commuter minibus carrying passengers from Yala to Songkhla on a small rural short-cut was ambushed by suspected insurgents at approximately 8: 00 am on March 14. While hundreds of people have been killed in drive-by shootings and official vehicles (i.e. those with uniformed military or police escorts) have taken fire in similar circumstances, this appears to be the first case where suspected militants blocked the road, forced passengers out of the vehicle and executed them on the spot. Eight people were killed and one was critically injured--all were Buddhists. According to initial press accounts, the driver of the vehicle was spared after the gunmen determined that he was Muslim. It is not clear why this van was targeted. According to Thailand Human Rights Watch adviser Sunai Phasuk (protect), the militants knew the route and schedule for this commuter company, and targeted it specifically because most passengers are usually Buddhist, and as an effort to "cut off" travel between the deep South and the rest of the country. Local police officers, however, characterized the attack as "random."

¶ 14. (C) The van ambush was followed by two separate attacks on Malay-Muslims on the evening of March 15. According to Yala police, at 8:30 pm, a grenade was thrown into a shelter outside of the Almu Baroh mosque in Yaha district, Yala. Twelve Malay-Muslim men, ranging in age from 25-73, were wounded. One hour later, unidentified suspects in a sedan threw at least one grenade and fired several shots into crowded tea house in Katong sub-district, Yala. Two men were killed and another 12 were injured. All were Malay-Muslim.

BANGKOK 00001572 002 OF 003

¶ 15. (C) All three incidents inspired public outrage. According to press reports, Buddhists as far as away as the Northeastern provinces of Si Sa Ket and Roi Et protested the attack on their co-religionists. Meanwhile, police report that a group of 50 local villagers organized near the mosque in Yaha on March 15 to protest the grenade attack and demand an investigation.

¶ 16. (C) Prime Minister Surayud admitted to reporters on March 15 that the attacks represented a deterioration in the situation, but reiterated his support for conciliatory measures. "We cannot solve this problem in anger...we will solve southern unrest only with peaceful means." According to press reports, Surayud ordered Interior Minister Aree Wong-Araya to travel to the South to inspect the region; the PM also announced his plan to transfer National Intelligence Agency (NIA) chief Waipot Srinual back to the Ministry of Defense--it was not clear whether this was tied to the Yala attacks.

¶ 17. (SBU) Late afternoon on March 15, GEN Wiroj Buacharoon, the commander of the 4th Army Region covering the South, announced on television: a curfew is in effect from 8:00 pm until 4:00 am in two districts in Yala, local people hosting overnight visitors must report their guests, citizens should carry identification cards at all times, and civilians are prohibited from having personal two-way radios or dressing like military or police officers.

#### FIRST BUDDHIST COUNTERPROTEST IN PATTANI

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¶ 18. (C) These vicious attacks in Yala were preceded by a disturbing event in Pattani on March 11. For the first time, a group of Malay-Muslims protesting the recent arrests of suspected insurgents was challenged by a Buddhist counter-protest. According to local police contacts, six local Malay-Muslims came to the Na Pradu police station on the morning of March 11 to discuss the recent arrest of their

relatives. Soon after their arrival, almost 100 Malay-Muslims--mostly women, some from Pattani, some from Yala--arrived to protest the arrests. In response, a crowd of approximately 100 Buddhists soon gathered, with many verbally challenging the Muslim crowd. Security forces--including the all-female Ranger unit--were able to keep the two sides apart, but according to local police and press contacts who were at the scene, both sides exchanged heated words. One elderly Buddhist man attempted to attack the Muslim side, but was held back by the Rangers. According to the local chief of police, the counter-protest was not exclusively Buddhist, but included local Malay-Muslims as well. (Note: we cannot confirm this. End Note.) After several hours of peaceful--if boisterous--protest, both sides dispersed at 11:45 am.

BOTH SIDES GEARING FOR A CLASH?

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¶9. (C) Human Rights Watch's Sunai--who has a strong network of contacts in the Malay-Muslim and Buddhist communities in the South--is increasingly worried that the specter of sectarian violence is approaching. Citing the four incidents mentioned above, Sunai believes that the insurgents are focused on provoking a Buddhist backlash, so as to inspire overly harsh tactics by the government and destroy the idea of peaceful coexistence between the two faiths--both of which would increase popular Muslim-Malay support for separation. According to Sunai, the separatists are switching from widespread, multiple target attacks (such as the August 2006 Yala bank bombings) to increasingly vicious attacks like the Yala minibus ambush, that will attract more Buddhist outrage and, hopefully, reprisals.

¶10. (C) Both Sunai and Janes Intelligence's Anthony Davis (protect) are concerned about the rising potential for Buddhist reprisals. Sunai believes that elements in the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and Army--frustrated by the

BANGKOK 00001572 003 OF 003

reconciliation approach of the Surayud government--are agitating for more direct crackdowns on suspected separatists. Indeed, Sunai says that elements of MOI have been behind the recent protests in the rural Northeast, and that the Pattani Governor organized the Buddhist counter-protest in Pattani on March 11. According to Sunai, MOI officials are trying to sideline those figures--such as Southern Border Provinces Administration Center (SBPAC) chief Pranai--who advocate a "soft" approach, in part by building nationwide Buddhist outrage over the violence in the South. "They (MOI) are out of control."

¶11. (C) Local security officials are frustrated with the Surayud government's "soft approach" according to Davis, especially in light of recent separatist attacks. "They are close to mutinous." (Note: this characterization reflects frustration with RTG policy and local leadership, not support for the overthrown of the current government. End Note.) While not necessarily advocating a severe or overly harsh crackdown on local separatist suspects, these officials are frustrated by the lack of action, any action, in response to the attacks. Sunai is even more pessimistic. While he is relatively confident that regular Army units and senior commanders in the South will resist internal pressure to lash out at the local population, ("they learned the lesson of Krue Se and Tak Bai"), he is concerned that the irregular Rangers--whether on their own or as a proxy for regular forces--may "cross the line." Sunai says that most local Muslims believe that non-uniformed paramilitary Rangers were behind the Yaha mosque and tea shop attacks.

COMMENT

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¶12. (C) Surayud's "reconciliation policy" has garnered praise

and support from many with long experience in the southern provinces, who understand that it will take years to restore peace to the troubled region. For security forces in the South, and the broader public, reconciliation is a hard sell, and getting harder all the time. It appears that the insurgents are intentionally shaping their policies to provoke a violent response from security forces, furthering the cycle of violence and disrupting the government's efforts to reach out to the Malay-Muslim population. MOI efforts to undermine the PM's reconciliation policy would not be surprising, given that local MOI officials and their elected subordinates are doing a lot of the dying in the South. Open conflict between the Malay-Muslim and Thai/Sino-Buddhist communities in the South would represent a major escalation of the conflict (and would be another blow to the beleaguered PM.) The situation has not deteriorated to this point yet, but the trends are disturbing.

BOYCE